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## THE DOUBLE CONDITIONING OF POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

GRASSROOTS POLITICS ON FACEBOOK

JANNICK SCHOU, JOHAN FARKAS  
AND MORTEN HJELHOLT

*Corresponding author: Jannick Schou. IT University of Copenhagen. Rued Langgaards Vej 7, 2300 Copenhagen S. [janh@itu.dk](mailto:janh@itu.dk)*

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## KEYWORDS

*Participation, discourse, double conditioning, power relations, materiality, Facebook, case study, grassroots politics*

## ABSTRACT

*The emergence of social network sites as a part of everyday life has given rise to a number of debates on the democratic potential afforded by these technologies. This paper addresses political participation facilitated through Facebook from a practice-oriented perspective and presents a case study of the political grassroots organisation, Fight For The Future. Initially, the paper provides a basic theoretical framework that seeks to map the relation between civic practices, materiality, and discursive features. Using this framework, the article analyses Fight For The Future's use of Facebook to facilitate political participation. The study finds that user participation on the Facebook page is 'double conditioned' by the material structure of the social network site on the one hand and by the discourses articulated by the organisation and users on the other. Finally, the paper discusses the findings and raises a number of problems and obstacles facing participatory grassroots organisations, such as Fight For The Future, when using Facebook.*

## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

*Jannick Schou is a Master's student at the IT University of Copenhagen, involved in the strategic research initiative DECIDIS (Democracy and Citizenship in Digital Society). His main research interests include the political dimensions of new media.*

*Johan Farkas is a Master's student at the IT University of Copenhagen, involved in the strategic research initiative DECIDIS. His research interests include online activism, propaganda, and political participation.*

*Morten Hjelholt (PhD) is an Associate Professor at IT University of Copenhagen, involved in the Culture & Communication Research Group, and member of the DECIDIS steering group. He attained his PhD within the field of Political Science with a focus on the digitalisation of the Danish public sector, and conducts research on advanced digital marginality and cultural citizenship in the light of Danish IT policies.*

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## INTRODUCTION

The concept of ‘participation’ has had a minor academic renaissance during the last decade. However, due to its widespread use in a number of different traditions the concept is notoriously slippery and often used without much conceptual clarity (Carpentier, 2011; Dahlgren, 2013; Reestorff, Fabian, Fritsch, Stage, & Stephensen, 2014, Fuchs, 2011). Nevertheless, the notion may be more relevant now than ever before, as new forms of civic practices have emerged alongside the development of new media technologies (Dahlgren, 2013, 2014; Bakardjieva, 2012). In a political context, new information and communication technologies have provided potentially new ways for citizens to collaborate, communicate, and participate in democratic processes (Castells, 2012; Bakardjieva, 2012; Bennett & Segerberg, 2012), and have proven to be more effective, less expensive, and easier to use than older media (Dahlgren, 2011), changing users from members of a receptive audience to active producers-consumers (Bruns, 2008; Castells, 2009).

In this paper, we explore political participation on social network sites and present a case study of the online, grassroots organisation Fight For The Future. Fight For The Future [FFTF] is an American organisation with more than 100,000 likes on Facebook that actively utilises this platform to engage citizens in collective political actions. The organisation seeks to influence the institutionalised political system through bottom-up initiatives and is, in its own words, “dedicated to protecting and expanding the Internet’s transformative power in our lives by creating civic campaigns that are engaging for millions of people” (“Fight For The Future”, 2015). In recent times, FFTF has sought to bring individuals together in collective online actions against political issues such as (state) surveillance and governmental legislative proposals, such as the Stop Online Piracy Act (SOPA) and the Cyber Intelligence Sharing and Protection Act (CISPA). As part of these on-going political struggles, the organisation utilises Facebook to build political campaigns and encourage users to participate in these. In our view, FFTF represents an interesting example of how political grassroots organisations can use social network sites in order to attempt to influence the political system on an everyday basis through bottom-up initiatives. It is an example, we argue, of an emergent form of participatory organisation that seeks to mobilise the potential of new media for political purposes.

The overall aim of this paper is to examine political participation on FFTF’s Facebook page: what type of civic practices does it include? And how are such civic practices conditioned? We have chosen to approach our case from a practice-oriented perspective, building on the works of Carpentier (2007, 2009, 2011, 2012) and Dahlgren (2009, 2013, 2014). This approach entails examining participation as a range of civic practices – such as debating, commenting, and disseminating (political) information – situated within a complex interplay between material and discursive features. By adopting a practice-oriented perspective on these relations, we seek to analyse how participation is performed within a situated set of socio-technological relations, and to problematize the potential

obstacles and problems facing participation in such mediated environments. The main argument emerging from this study is that political participation – understood as a multiplicity of civic practices performed on an everyday basis – is ‘double conditioned’. We will argue that participation is both conditioned by the material structure of a given medium, but also by the discursive features present within a given context.

In this paper, we first discuss existing research on political participation and social network sites. We then present a number of reflections on the concept of participation and outline our theoretical framework. This is followed by a presentation of our case study, methodology, and findings. Finally, we consider our findings in relation to grassroots politics more broadly: do standardised platforms such as Facebook provide new and productive political spaces – with new means available to participatory organisations – or do they rather obfuscate and influence participation in potentially problematic and harmful ways? These are some of the questions we will raise in the final section of this paper based on the findings from our case study.

## POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND SOCIAL NETWORKS SITES

Since the early days of the World Wide Web, online platforms have been used in a variety of ways by political organisations and social movements in order to spread political information, attack opponents, and build grassroots communities (Gurak, 2014; Kahn & Kellner, 2004). However, alongside the rise of social network technologies in recent years, new forms of protest and political participation have emerged, and the field of political participation has undergone rapid transformations (Micó & Casero-Ripollés, 2014; Roberts, 2014). Recent debates on the use of social network sites for political participation have especially focused on the use of Twitter and Facebook in relation to contemporary social movements and revolutions (Castells, 2012; Gerbaudo, 2012; Flesher Fominaya, 2014; Segerberg & Bennett, 2011). Several scholars have seen the use of social network sites as instrumental in empowering citizens in a number of contemporary movements against capitalist and state oppression (Castells, 2012; Shirky, 2008). At the same time, a number of scholars have remained more reluctant to draw such conclusions in relation to the revolutionary potential of social network sites in general, instead focusing on, for example, the interplay between new and old media (Rane and Salem, 2011), the use of specific platforms such as Twitter (Theocharis et al., 2014; Tremayne, 2014), or critically evaluating the potential negative effects of new media (Morozov, 2011; Lovink, 2011). These studies highlight how social network sites play an important part in contemporary politics, especially in relation to large-scale socio-political phenomena. They also emphasise how new media should not simply be seen as inherently democratising or emancipatory, but rather located within complex socio-cultural relations, with both productive and/or harmful consequences (see also Valtysson, 2012).

While a number of scholars have focused on political participation as part of institutionalised politics or during states of exception (revolutions or uprisings), less research has focused on more mundane or everyday forms of political participation. However, as Bakardjieva (2009, 2012) has argued, the rise of new media has potentially provided new ways for citizens to engage in political processes and participate in an everyday context. Suggesting the term *mundane citizenship*, Bakardjieva (2012) presents a strong argument for the importance of studying everyday forms of politics, as “mundane citizenship enabled by new media manifests the power of ordinary people who are not political operators or dedicated members of formal NGOs and social movements, to engage, participate and sometimes change developments on the large political stage of social design” (Bakardjieva, 2012, p. 1371). In this paper, we seek to explore how such forms of mundane citizenship – in our case in the form of (everyday) grassroots politics through Facebook – are conditioned by both the material structure of a given platform and by the discourses present within a given context. As has been noted by Poell (2014, 2015), there has been a tendency to neglect the materiality of (new) media and instead treat them as more or less neutral tools. This is a problem, according to Poell, as “social media do not function as tools. Instead these media are entangled in complex sets of socio-economic, political, cultural and technological relations” (2014, p. 191). In the context of political participation, we argue that Valtysson (2014a, 2014b) in particular has provided valuable (empirical) insights into how social network sites do not simply constitute neutral spaces for democratic deliberation but are actively shaping and conditioning the discursive possibilities afforded to users. Valtysson’s (2014a) findings underline that the platform-specific structures of a given medium must be kept in mind when studying emergent forms of mediated participation. Langlois et al. (2009) have also argued that the level of code and politics are becoming increasingly intertwined within contemporary forms of networked participation. In a similar vein, both Carpentier (2009, 2011) and Dahlgren (2013) have shown how various types of organisations may facilitate and condition highly different types of user participation. As such, there is no one-size-fits-all model for participation; rather, it must be studied as concrete and situated phenomena. Building on this existing research, we approach political participation as both technologically conditioned and a dynamic, situated process. In this paper, we thus seek to contribute to the emergent body of research dealing with political participation, new media, and the socio-technological conditions of such civic practices through an empirical case study of a grassroots organisation.

In the following section, we discuss the notion of participation and explore how this concept may be operationalized from a practice-oriented perspective. These theoretical considerations will serve as a basic framework for our analysis of political participation on FFTF’s Facebook page.

## ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK: PARTICIPATION AND MEDIA

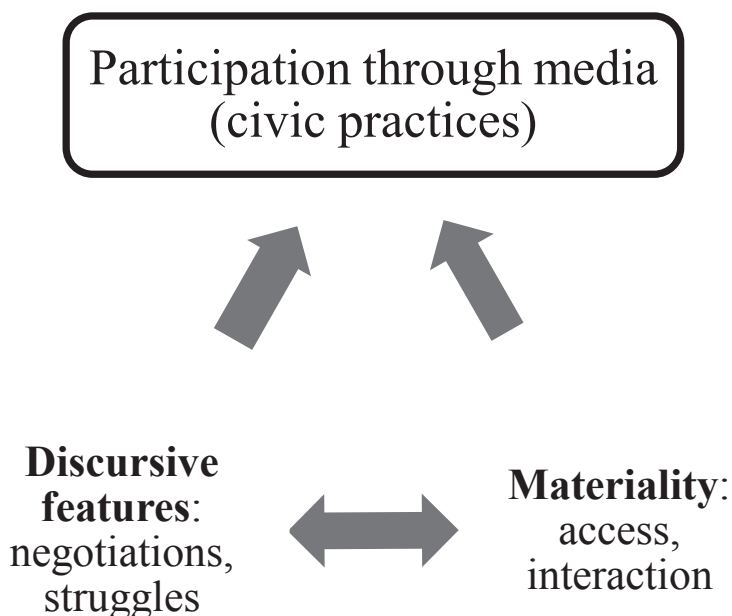
Participation is a complex concept. In the words of Carpentier (2011), it constitutes a site of continuous ideological-democratic struggle. As such, participation (always) entails an underlying idea of what the political should be and how it should be conducted (Turnšek, 2007). In this paper, we build on the work of Dahlgren (2013, 2014) and Carpentier (2011), who – primarily from the perspective of radical democratic theorists such as Mouffe (2005, 2013) – have argued for a maximalist approach to participation. In this view, political participation – understood as the ways in which actors involve themselves in political life through a myriad of civic practices – cannot be reduced to formalised political practices such as voting. Rather, as both Dahlgren (2013, 2014) and Carpentier (2011) have stressed, participation entails a continuous process in which citizens engage in intersubjective deliberation, contestation, and struggles. It is a pluralistic approach that views participation as being constituted by a wide range of civic practices, primarily situated outside the formalised (political) system. The practice-oriented perspective employed in this paper builds particularly on Dahlgren’s (2009, 2013, 2014) work on civic cultures and civic practices. Dahlgren (2014) suggests operationalizing (political) participation as a “particular mode of civic practices, a part of the larger horizons of civic cultures” (2014, p. 65). In this view, “participation is no one specific thing, but is rather a summary term that captures what must inevitably be a wide range of practices” (ibid.). Thus Dahlgren suggests approaching participation in a very broad sense, not merely as processes linked to formal forms of decision-making, but rather as a whole range of civic practices located “in the informal micro-meshes of the everyday life of democracy” (Dahlgren, 2014, p. 65). This is a perspective that resonates with Bakardjieva’s notions of *sub-activism* (2009) and *mundane citizenship* (2012), and it is these ‘micro-meshes’ we attempt to unravel in this paper.

In the context of media, Carpentier, Dahlgren & Pasquali (2013) have made a distinction between participation *through* media and participation *in* media. While the first category describes civic practices facilitated through the use of new media, the latter describes how non-professional users can partake in the co-production and consumption of user-generated content. This conceptual distinction is important, as it highlights the difference between participation as expressions of civic agency (i.e. *political* participation), and participation as expressions of user co-productions (i.e. *cultural* participation). The latter has also been conceptualised as participatory culture (Jenkins et al., 2009) or produsage (Bruns, 2008). It is important to note that these two different understandings of participation are often highly interconnected, and consequently the distinction is primarily analytical. In other words, participating through media will often entail participating in media. In this paper, we analyse participation through media from a practice-oriented perspective. As such, our study focuses on the concrete civic practices on FFTF’s Facebook page, particularly those forming between the users and the organisation. Thus, we

do not investigate whether the participation found on this Facebook page is influencing institutionalised politics or political processes elsewhere. We have limited this study to the interaction on the Facebook page in and of itself.

## ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

Having now outlined our understanding of participation as a theoretical concept, this section will discuss how we have chosen to address participation facilitated through media empirically. As stated above, we approach participation – following Dahlgren (2009, 2014) – as a particular set of civic practices. In order to contextualise this notion of (civic) practices, we particularly draw on the work of Carpentier (2011), who has provided a large analytical toolbox for unravelling the intricacies of participation and media. The main point in this respect is that civic practices can never be abstracted from the wider environment in which they are enacted: participation through media – understood as a set of civic practices within the horizon of civic cultures – is always a situated process that is influenced by the discursive and material features of the specific context (Carpentier, 2011). To put it slightly differently: the civic practices entailed in participation should be seen as conditioned by a complex interrelation between what individuals (or organisations) are doing and the technological (material) environment in which they are doing it. Civic practices, then, are not exempt from the wider interplay of discursive negotiations, antagonisms, and struggles found within a given medium, nor from the material structure of such a medium (we have illustrated this approach in figure 1).



*Figure 1: Analytical framework*

In order to explore the discursive features of this model, both Carpentier (2011) and Dahlgren (2013) have suggested appropriating Laclau & Mouffe's (2014 [1985]) discourse theory. In this paper, we primarily draw on Dahlgren's (2013) operationalization of this theory as an analytical framework useful for examining the discursive features of a particular context. Regarding the role of materiality, we have chosen to operationalize our analysis based on Carpentier's (2011) notions of *access* and *interaction*. We appropriate these concepts in a technological context as ways of empirically analysing the material conditions of participation. Carpentier's (2011) concepts allow us to examine the following: What conditions need to be fulfilled in order to utilise a given platform (Access)? How does a given platform allow users to interact, contribute, and create content (Interaction)? Using these concepts, we address how the materiality of Facebook conditions the civic practices enacted through FFTF's page. Contrary to, for example, notions of *affordances* often used in the literature (boyd, 2011; Renninger, 2014), we find these two concepts (access and interaction) to be empirically productive as they have a clearly defined scope and content. In this regard, it should be kept in mind that given technological platforms do "not just set obstacles, they also facilitate" (Dahlgren, 2011, p. 105) participation, and that media are not static entities, but rather subject to continuous (technological) changes. Such structures should therefore be considered on an on-going basis through empirical analysis (Dahlgren, 2011). Our argument, then, is not a technological determinist one – suggesting that technologies determine the social processes enacted through them – but rather one that is sensitive to the agency of technologies. Finally, both Carpentier (2011) and Dahlgren (2013) have argued for a strong link between participation and power relations. According to both authors, participation is essentially about sharing power. As such, civic practices cannot be equated with participation, as power has to be actualised in some way. In this regard, the empirical questions become: Who can set the political agenda? To what extent can such expressions of power be resisted and contested? And is dissent and conflict an option? It is important to note that power is not only tied to the discursive features of civic practices, but also to the materiality of a given medium (Dahlgren, 2013).

Overall, we have (in this section) presented a practice-oriented perspective on participation through media building on the work of Dahlgren (2009, 2013, 2014) and Carpentier (2011). Following these authors, we have argued that in order to understand participation – in a broad sense as a wide range of civic practices – it is necessary to analyse the complex relations between the discursive and material features within a given medium. The outlined framework is not meant to be exhaustive, but rather a basic vocabulary that may be used for specific analyses of participation facilitated through media. In the following section we utilise this theoretical perspective to investigate our empirical case.



## CASE STUDY: FIGHT FOR THE FUTURE

As stated in the introduction, FFTF is a grassroots organisation whose aim is to eliminate what they perceive as threats to freedom of speech online – primarily in an American context. To achieve this goal, the organisation facilitates the creation of online campaigns and petitions aimed at bringing individuals together in large-scale collective actions. The organisation is, in other words, based on encouraging participation through media. FFTF's first political campaigns date back to October 2011, and examples of activities include anti-surveillance petitions, anti-SOPA campaigns, anti-CISPA campaigns, and the mobilisation of pro net-neutrality demonstrations. The organisation is not a direct extension of established democratic institutions but rather constitutes a civic, political organisation functioning outside the formalised system in an everyday setting. FFTF uses a number of different media, including Twitter, Tumblr, and Facebook as well as a main website [[www.fightforthefuture.org](http://www.fightforthefuture.org)] that acts as a hub for various dedicated campaign sites [e.g. [www.resetthenet.org](http://www.resetthenet.org), [www.occupythefcc.com](http://www.occupythefcc.com) and [www.battleforthenet.com](http://www.battleforthenet.com)]. This study focuses exclusively on FFTF's use of Facebook as a platform for facilitating user participation and civic practices, although it should be kept in mind that this usage is part of a larger network of different platforms utilised by the organisation.

## METHODS: DATA COLLECTION AND CODING

To examine our case empirically, we have employed a combination of qualitative and quantitative content analyses of posts and comments collected from FFTF's Facebook page. This mixed methods approach has been based on the methodological guidelines outlined by Ackland (2013), Mayring (2000), and Hsieh & Shannon (2005). The content analyses incorporate two samples of posts and comments created by FFTF and its users. The first sample includes 51 posts by FFTF and 1905 user comments dating from 21 August 2014 to 21 September 2014. This data was archived on 21 October 2014. The second (smaller) sample includes user posts and organisational posts from 2 February 2015 to 11 March 2015 (100 user posts, 34 posts by the organisation). This data was archived on 12 March 2015. As part of the qualitative content analysis, the multi-modal posts and comments were collected, analysed, and coded using an inductive coding scheme (Ackland, 2013; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). First, all of the material was read through and annotated with themes. As part of this coding, we specifically analysed (1) the type of content provided by FFTF, and (2) the discourse articulated by FFTF in their posts. We incorporated Dahlgren's (2013) appropriation of Laclau and Mouffe's (2014) discourse theory in this stage of the coding. Following this initial coding, the data was re-read systematically utilising the established themes and grouping data under each theme. The qualitative content analysis was conducted manually by one of the authors. The quantitative content analysis incorporated both manifest and latent variables (Ackland,

2013). The manifest variables (i.e. likes, shares, and number of comments) were coded by the authors based on Facebook's own statistics. The latent content – percentages of users accepting, negotiating, and/or rejecting the discursive articulations provided by FFTF – was also coded manually by one of the authors. In case of doubt, the authors coded the individual post in collaboration.

In the following, we proceed to present our findings on the material and discursive features of FFTF's use of Facebook based on the analytical framework outlined above.

## MATERIALITY: ACCESS AND INTERACTION

In this section, we analyse how the technological structure of Facebook conditions (and facilitates) the civic practices on FFTF's Facebook page. Following Carpentier (2011), as already stated, we appropriate the concepts of *access* and *interaction* to analyse the material structure of the Facebook page.

FFTF uses a (public) Facebook page to facilitate civic practices such as debating, commenting, and sharing information. The Facebook page allows users to interact through practices such as commenting, liking, and sharing posts and comments created by FFTF, as well as posts and comments created by other users. As such, there are two (main) ways for users to interact in writing: (a) by commenting on posts by the organisation or (b) by creating their own posts/commenting on user posts. At this point, however, a clear difference emerges. As the two types of posts are not displayed visually in the same way on the Facebook page, they do not receive the same amount of interaction and activity. In this context, we observe that posts made by users are relegated to a small (and barely visible) sidebar on the Facebook page, while posts made by the page owner (in this case FFTF) occupy the main visual area. To unfold this technologically conditioned difference empirically, we quantified the average number of likes, comments, and shares on these two types of posts (see Table 1) using a small sample of posts by users on the page ( $N=100$ ) and posts by FFTF ( $N=34$ ).

	POSTS BY USERS	POSTS BY FFTF
Likes	0.18 per post in average [8 max]	525.06 per post in average [2167 max]
Comments	0.05 per post in average [2 max]	21.91 per post in average [89 max]
Shares	0.01 per post in average [1 max]	187.24 per post in average [718 max]

Table 1. Number of likes, comments, and shares on user posts and posts by Fight For The Future.

Although we have only quantified a relatively small sample, the table above does seem to suggest a clear pattern: user posts on the page are almost never liked, shared, or commented on. As such we find that, although Facebook enables users to create their own posts on the page, the majority of user interaction revolves around posts created by the

organisation. In our view this reveals a clear asymmetrical distribution between the users and the organisation; one that is, we argue, sustained and further enhanced by the materiality of the Facebook page due to the different levels of visibility given to the two types of posts. Thus, while users do have the opportunity to create posts, these posts do not act as a site of (socio-political) participation or collective deliberation. As a consequence, every user comment has to be situated as a *reaction* to content posted by the organisation if it is to acquire any sort of visibility on this technological platform. Facebook's visual hierarchy highlights the content produced by the organisation: it gives the organisation a privileged position within this medium. We argue that this visual hierarchy plays an important part in shaping the discursive features of this case (an argument we unfold further below).

In relation to access, contributing to the Facebook page depends on (a) access to the Internet, and (b) having a personal Facebook profile. To enter into this public Facebook page, then, and be a part of the civic practices enacted there, the user is required to fulfil these conditions. Overall, then, we argue that the civic practices offered to the individual user are both conditioned by the outlined modes of access, and also by the modes of interaction. This might be illustrated in the following way (noting that access and interaction does not equal participation, but merely provides the grounds for this – see Carpentier, 2012):

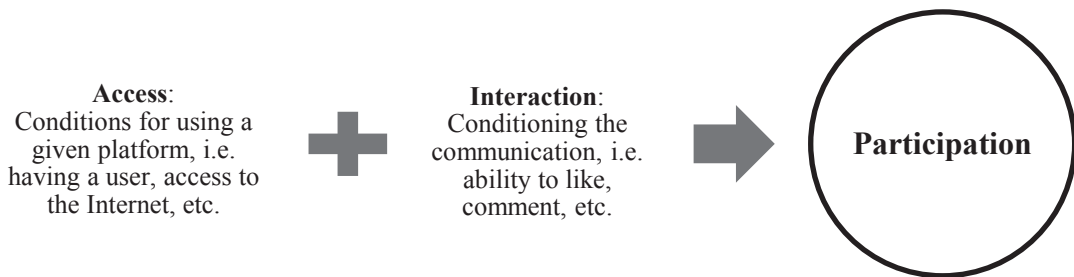


Figure 2. *Materiality: Access and Interaction.*

This model highlights our contention that Facebook acts as a technological gatekeeper: it gates the access to the page, while also conditioning the ways in which users can interact. This gating and conditioning is to a large degree unnegotiable. The user cannot, for example, choose *not* to have a user profile, if she wishes to participate in the production of content. Although the user does have a certain manoeuvrability vis-à-vis the possible modes of interaction, these are not limitless. The design of Facebook sets certain limitations – it provides finite ways of participating *in* media and (as such, also potentially) *through* media. This suggests, on an empirical level, that the public Facebook page used by FFTF does not constitute a neutral communicative space. Rather, we argue, it is a space that is conditioned and shaped by the architecture of the medium.

In the following section, we turn to an analysis of the discursive features on FFTF's Facebook page. We will argue that the material conditioning discussed in this section – comprised of particular forms of access and interaction inscribed into Facebook's 'level of code' – is intertwined with a discursive form of conditioning.

## DISCURSIVE FEATURES

In this section, we examine the discursive features of our case. As outlined in the previous section, the materiality of the utilised Facebook page conditions the practices available to users and the organisation, and it supports an asymmetrical relation between these. Due to this differentiation, we have chosen to examine the content produced by the organisation and the users in two stages. First, we analyse the discourse articulated by the organisation, and second, we analyse the negotiations and discursive contestations performed by the users.

### FIGHT FOR THE FUTURE: TYPES OF CONTENT AND DISCOURSE

Based on the qualitative content analysis of Facebook posts made by FFTF, we find that the organisation's posts are mainly used for two purposes: (1) to encourage direct forms of political action aimed at influencing the institutionalised political system, and (2) to disseminate information regarding political topics and create awareness among users. In relation to the first category, the organisation facilitates a number of different actions and encourages users to enact civic practices such as signing petitions, writing and tweeting to local congressmen and politicians, and telephoning certain organisations in order to voice their discontent. As a result the organisation oftentimes encourages quite direct forms of civic practice. In regards to the second category of posts, the organisation also uses Facebook to disseminate and spread (political) information. These posts can, for example, include updates on on-going campaigns initiated by the organisation or links to specific news stories accompanied by encouragements for users to participate through comments on Facebook and by spreading the word (i.e. sharing). This second type of post should not be seen as encouraging civic practices aimed at influencing political processes directly, but rather as encouraging civic practices aimed at creating awareness, disseminating information, and encouraging user debates. FFTF, then, uses Facebook both to facilitate action and to encourage discussion and dissemination of information. It should be noted that these two types of post often blur empirically and that posts may aim at achieving both these ends simultaneously. However, this coding highlights how the content produced by FFTF follows a clear pattern, and that the organisation uses its Facebook page to encourage a specific and limited set of civic practices.

Following this overall analysis of the types of posts created by the organisation, we turn towards our discourse theoretical analysis of the organisation's posts: what kind of discourse is articulated by the organisation? And how are the users articulated? First, we



find that FFTF articulates itself in opposition to corporate and governmental institutions. Thus institutions such as Time Warner Cable or the NSA are often constructed as being in direct opposition to FFTF (and – by extension – the users). This antagonistic relation is, for example, articulated through signifiers such as ‘Team Internet’ versus ‘Team Cable’, which FFTF uses to construct a form of counter-hegemonic discourse – that is, as a way of articulating other discourses than those circulating within the mainstream media system. This is also reflected in FFTF’s mission statement on their Facebook page:

Fight for the Future organizes people to fight for their rights and interests, because technology is too central to our basic freedom for its rules to be written by lobbyists and monopolies ... Our goal is to make the public’s interest vividly clear, so clear that not even the most powerful lobbyists and smartest monopolies can subvert it. (“Fight for the Future”, 2015)

Second, the organisation constructs itself as a bottom-up alternative to mainstream and institutionalised politics: it articulates itself as a way for (primarily American) citizens to voice their discontent. Third, FFTF articulates itself as an organisation that is fighting for ‘freedom’. Freedom functions as a nodal point within the organisation’s discourse – a privileged centre of meaning – and is linked to a number of signifiers, such as ‘net neutrality’, ‘battle’, ‘state censorship’, ‘save’, and ‘privacy’. Freedom is articulated as something that is lost and must be saved through battles fought by citizens via non-institutionalised initiatives. Furthermore, the organisation often attributes this loss of freedom to governmental and corporate interference and hegemony. In opposition to this, the organisation articulates its users as empowered agents with the ability to affect and change political processes. The organisation constructs a communitarian sense of a collective, counter-hegemonic ‘we’: “We’re winning the battle, but the war is far from over” (Post by FFTF, 6 February 2015), or “Join Team Internet and fight back in the Battle for the Net” (Post by FFTF, 27 August 2014). FFTF does not, however, only articulate their users as an empowered *collective*, but also as empowered *individuals* with the ability to influence institutionalised politics themselves: “These are the final moments to make sure your voice is heard” (post by FFTF, 23 February 2015). This simultaneous collective-individual articulation is interesting, as it constructs the users as both being empowered on their own, while also being empowered as a community.

Overall, then, our analysis shows that FFTF articulates itself as a counter-hegemonic organisation that enables citizens/users to voice their discontent and influence institutionalised politics through civic practices. FFTF articulates their users as empowered collective and individual agents that need to be heard. This notion of the empowered users, however, begs the question: How do users participate in the decision-making processes related to FFTF? Are they able to influence the agendas set by FFTF through the Facebook page? And do they contest the discourse produced by FFTF? As our analysis of the material conditioning highlighted, there is a distinct asymmetrical relationship between

the organisation and its user. The next step in this analysis, then, is to engage with the comments created by the users. What role do the users have in the processes found on the Facebook page?

#### USERS: DISCURSIVE CONTESTATIONS AND DOMINANCE

In order to examine the content produced by the users, we quantified a small sub-sample of user comments ( $n = 297$ , sample 1) based on four overall categories: comments accepting the discourse provided by the organisation; comments rejecting the discourse; comments negotiating the discourse; and, finally, comments with no reference to the provided discourse (see Table 3). With this quantification, we sought to explore how the content produced by the users related to the discourse produced by the organisation: did the users accept FFTF's discourse? Or did they rather contest and reject it?

	%
<i>Accept</i> discourse by FFTF	86%
<i>Negotiate</i> discourse by FFTF	8%
<i>Reject</i> discourse by FFTF	4%
<i>Other</i> (no reference to discourse provided; spam; other)	2%

*Table 3. Share of comments that accept, negotiate or reject the discourse articulated by Fight For The Future  
n = 297 user comments*

Examining the user comments, we first of all found that almost every comment – in some way or another – refers to the discourse constructed by FFTF in their posts. This may appear unsurprising given that we are examining comments to posts made by the organisation. However, it should be highlighted that these comments are (in some respect) the only way for users to communicate to other users on the Facebook page, as posts by the users themselves (as highlighted above) rarely attract any activity. These figures highlight how the discourse articulated by FFTF hold a privileged position: it is dominant on the Facebook page. Not only are the user comments situated as reactions to this dominant discourse, but most of the user comments also accept the discourse without further contestation (86 %). This makes way for a peculiar paradox. On the one hand, the organisation may be challenging dominant ideologies and discourses within a broader political (American) context; they may, in other words (though this is not something this project has researched in depth) provide a counter-hegemonic discourse to the ones presented within the broader political system and public. On the other hand, within the particular relation between the organisation and the users, the discourse articulated by FFTF is dominant in and of itself. Within the boundaries of the Facebook page, and this is important to stress, their discourse dominates all other discourses. Although a few

users do reject and negotiate this organisational discourse (4 % and 8 %), we only found, as part of our research, a single instance in which FFTF replied to a comment. This was regarding a factual error in a post. Furthermore, in relation to the posts contesting and rejecting the discourse provided by the organisation, we encountered a number of cases in which users, accepting the organisational discourse, ‘policed’ the comments. This means that users – and usually the same handful of users – contested the rejections collectively in (what seemed to be) a systematic and highly organised fashion. Thus, even in cases where users did engage in discursive contestations, other users attacked these contestations by reproducing the dominant discourse articulated by the organisation.

In the maximalist perspective on participation advocated in this paper – which stresses difference and pluralism – we find that there is very little actual conflictual dialogue to be found within the relation between users/users and users/organisation. Furthermore, we also find the civic practices enacted by the users – such as commenting, discussing, and contesting discourses – are largely without any real bearing on the larger processes enacted by the organisation. During the course of our research, we did not encounter a single instance in which any connection between (civic) user practices on the Facebook page and the organisational practices were visible. This suggests that the debates and comments created by the users are largely left within their own secluded sphere – without much influence on the workings of the organisation. Overall, we argue that this represents another form of conditioning: a discursive conditioning. Users are limited in the types of discourse they can engage in as a consequence of the discourse articulated by the organisation and the reproduction (and policing) of this discourse by the majority of users. In this respect, it is once again central to underline that this discursive conditioning is highly connected to the material conditioning. Thus, part of the reason why there are so few discursive contestations might be that users have to have ‘liked’ the page in order to receive updates. As a consequence, commenting users most likely agree with the organisation before choosing to comment. In the following and closing section, we will argue that (taken together) these findings highlight what we term a *double conditioning* of participation.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS: THE DOUBLE CONDITIONING OF PARTICIPATION

The aim of this study has been to analyse how a contemporary grassroots organisation – Fight For The Future – utilises Facebook in order to facilitate and encourage user participation. At the same time, the aim has also been to investigate how the civic practices enacted within this emergent political space are conditioned. The findings from our analysis can be summarised as follows: we have found that the materiality of the Facebook page conditions the civic practices in two significant ways: (1) by gating the access to the platform, and (2) by limiting the available means of interaction and positioning the produced communication in a distinct (visual) hierarchy. When examining

the discursive features of this particular case, we found that users were largely relegated to providing communicative reactions to the discourse articulated by FFTF. We found that within the specific relation between the organisation and its users, the discourse produced by the organisation was clearly dominant. Once again, and this should be stressed, this dominance was not necessarily dominant from a macro-perspective (i.e. in relation to American politics as a whole), but specifically within the boundaries of the analysed Facebook page. Combining these findings, we argue for what may be termed a material-discursive *double conditioning* of political participation. With this term we suggest that users are both conditioned by the materiality of the technological platform and by the discourse articulated by the organisation and reproduced by users on the page. This double conditioning does not determine the analysed civic practices but it does condition how they may be enacted. Finally, as previously stated, participation is essentially about power and sharing power (Dahlgren, 2013; Carpentier, 2011). We found that the double conditioning in the analysed case left users with very little actual power to influence or shape the political processes on FFTF's page: on a material level, Facebook's structure provided a clear hierarchy between FFTF's posts and user posts, and on a discursive level, the discourse provided by the organisation was dominant. As such, FFTF's dominant position was not only created discursively, but also produced and supported by the material structure of Facebook. Meanwhile, the users – although discursively constructed by FFTF as empowered – were largely confined to signing up for petitions or other similar non-deliberative actions. They were (in many ways) reduced to statistics: numbers of likes, numbers of comments, and numbers of emails sent to politicians. In our view – following the maximalist view of participation adopted in this paper – these are highly impotent forms of civic practices, of the kind Dahlgren suggests viewing with “utmost scepticism” (2014, p. 64).

The problems outlined in this paper are obviously complex. For one thing, FFTF does not influence the code or materiality of Facebook in any particular way. The platform – as a totally standardised product – allows for very little customisation. Furthermore, though the organisation may encourage users to engage in more or less deliberative forms of political dialogue, they cannot force users to deliberate. And do users even want to engage in the type of pluralist radical participation envisioned here? The absence of difference and contestation found in this paper – and the dominance of the discourse produced by FFTF – cannot be attributed to FFTF exclusively. Additionally, as platforms like Facebook become more or less ubiquitous ways of being visible within the larger media ecology, it is, in a certain sense, only natural that grassroots organisations born online, such as FFTF, should utilise these. However, this does not necessarily mean that Facebook is particularly well suited for facilitating the types of civic practice intended and advocated by such participatory grassroots organisations. In our view, it is a complex wager between being where the users are and adopting platforms that are in line with the political goals and visions of the organisation. The much larger question – which we



will in no way attempt to answer in this paper – is whether truly maximalist versions of participation can ever be achieved using Facebook pages as a platform. And also – if this can be achieved – how the double conditioning of such participation would then unfold: would it be subverted? Or, rather, accepted in new and productive ways? There is no doubt that further research is needed in order to explore these questions. In this paper, we have first of all attempted to direct attention towards the double conditioning of participation through media.

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